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"You're Here Too"

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Mark 1:9-15

Most everybody I know has a story of giving up something for Lent gone awry. My worst Lenten fast story, or rather, my poorest choice, is from my junior year of college. In the months preceding Ash Wednesday, it had come to my attention that my coffee consumption had increased to about a full pot of coffee per day. Sometimes more. Realizing that this probably wasn't all that great for my health, I decided that it would be a wise Lenten discipline to give up coffee.

What was perhaps less wise was the rate at which I eased in to decaffeination, which could charitably be described as abrupt. As in, I woke up on Ash Wednesday, the day before having consumed way, way too much coffee, and had exactly zero on that day.

I'm sure you can all imagine the headache that came from this unwise and stubborn decision. Epic. What I haven't told you yet is that Ash Wednesday that year happened to fall right before midterms. And so, involuntarily, I ended up giving up both caffeine and decent grades for that second semester.

Lent is a strange time in our Christian liturgical year, because like Advent and Christmas, we've developed a lot of cultural norms around what Lent means. Both churchgoing and non-churchgoing Christians often have things that they do around the Lenten season - giving up a food, reading a devotional, committing to a practice. And for many, Lent has become a bit of a reset button on our failed New Year's resolutions. Or an opportunity for self-improvement and a little extra discipline. A religious motivation to give up chocolate and shed a few pounds.

Now I have nothing against giving up bad habits, taking up a positive practice, or refocusing the way you spend time. You and I should do all of those. It's just that I'm not entirely convinced that there's anything especially Lenten about those things. I think we get close when we take up a prayerful or meditative discipline, but this year, I'm not totally convinced that giving up ice cream is really going to cut it.

According to Mark and to the other Gospel writers, Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days. This is in part where we get the length of Lent from: go to Easter, count back 40 days not including Sundays, and you land on Ash Wednesday. As for Jesus' 40 days, I'm not sure what was out in the Judean desert for him, but I'm sure it wasn't pleasant. I'm guessing he had to have stumbled on some water once or twice just to survive, but that's about it. Now, I have no idea what it's like to fast for that long, but I have a friend who a couple of years

ago in an act of public protest fasted for nearly that long. By the end of her fast, she'd lost a good portion of her body weight, and was nearly unable to walk or move far outside her apartment. It wasn't good for her. It didn't make her a physically healthier person, it didn't improve her attitude or self-discipline, and for a full week afterwards, friends had to deliver food to her that she at first was barely even able to keep down.

Fasting for that long is brutal, so when Mark says that angels attended to Jesus at the end of his fast, it was not for any royal, heavenly reason, but for the mere fact that Jesus was almost certainly barely hanging on to life at the end of his fast. Why would he do that? Why, to prepare for his ministry, would he go out and suffer like that? Certainly giving up food and drink itself has no self-improvement qualities. Jesus didn't go out into the wilderness to take on some new disciplines, relinquish bad habits, or just refocus his mind.

So why does Mark include this story, even in just a few short verses? Why is it essential to understanding Jesus and his ministry? In thinking about that, I've noticed that the Gospel of Mark doesn't give an account of the birth of Jesus. Probably we're supposed to assume that it happened like it does for everybody else, but nonetheless, Jesus just sort of appears by the Jordan one day out of nowhere, no account given of his life beforehand. The question scholars pose about this Gospel often is: how are we supposed to know that Jesus is God? But I think there's an equally pressing question: What makes him human? Or rather, how does the Son of God know what it's like to be one of us?

Well, there's really no substitute for experience. Jesus goes out into the wilderness, already with decades of rabbinical training, and chooses to suffer - to face physical pain and the temptation of escape. There are a number of traditions around fasting, and of course one of them is to achieve a sort of union with God. But another is to fast as an act of solidarity with those who are suffering, whether to protest injustice, or to stand with those who go hungry not by their own choice.

I suspect that Jesus was sent into the wilderness for both of these tasks. I imagine that he communed with his Father in prayer. But his ministry was also to a people who were suffering - physically, emotionally, and spiritually. In order to be the one to save them, he knew that he had to go to where they were, and that his entire ministry would have to be going out there into the suffering of the people.

A few weeks ago I went to a book launch here in DC. The author is Kate Bowler, a young professor at Duke Divinity School and a leading theological expert in the Prosperity Gospel. She also has Stage 4 colon cancer. Right at the beginning of a career with a boundless upper trajectory, with a loving husband and an adorable son, her life was ripped out from under her.

In the years since her diagnosis and subsequent experimental treatments, she's written a memoir called *Everything Happens for a Reason (And Other Lies I've Loved)*. If I had a reading suggestion for you for Lent, this is it. It's one of the most genuine, heartbreaking, and funny accounts of suffering that I've ever read.

In it, she recounts her first Lent with cancer. Because it's the subject of her research, she'd been going to various Prosperity Gospel churches, mega-churches and tiny ones, and everywhere she went, there was something missing. While most churches refuse shouts of Alleluia during Lent, most of us at least singing the sadder hymns and acting with an increased level of gravity, there was none of that to be found. Each of these churches was on their way to success, blissfully unaware of a Lord who suffered in the wilderness, or whose ministry ends on an executioner's cross. Everywhere she went, it was sunshine and flowers.

And so in the midst of this she was sitting with her friend, and her friend started to tell her about her life in its ugly mess - her depression, her father's Alzheimer's, her worries about her own future and aging, and all of a sudden Kate finds herself sitting across the table, as she puts it herself, "smiling like the worst person on earth."

"I'm so sorry," she says. "It's not that I would ever want this for you, but - I'm sorry for saying this - but you live here too."

After a season of looking for a place that would at least acknowledge her suffering, it was finally a friend sitting across the table that was really church for her. Not for saying she was going to make everything better, nor for words of comfort and hope, not even for a listening ear, but for somebody to be able to look at and realize, "Oh, yea, you're here too."

Many of us know the story of the man who fell in the hole. He's yelling up for somebody to help, and he sees a doctor, who stops and throws him down a prescription. And then he sees a lawyer, who promises to sue the guy who put the whole there to begin with. And a pastor walks by, and shouts a prayer down the hole. And finally he sees his friend. And the friend, seeing the man in the hole, jumps down in the hole with him. "What are you doing? Now we're both stuck!" "Yea, but I've been here before, and I know the way out."

You're here too.

On Wednesday, Rachel and I took shifts sitting on the sidewalk outside the church with a bowl of ashes, offering to make the sign of the cross on the forehead of anybody who wanted it. We called it "Ashes-to-Go." It was an odd sensation for me, waiting outside to tell

perfect strangers that they are dust, and to dust they will return. For a few hours, our job as pastors was to remind passers-by that they were mortal.

At the very same time, in South Florida, a young man walked into another school and killed 17 people. It was the 30th mass shooting in a year that is under 50 days old.

Outside of the school, mothers and fathers and teachers and friends and siblings waited to hear news of their loved ones. One pointed picture showed a mother crying, the ashen sign of the cross prominently on her forehead. Except she doesn't need a reminder from me or anybody else that she is dust, and to dust she will return. She knows.

This particular shooting happened at the beginning of the six and a half weeks that the church says to itself that wherever there's suffering, wherever there's brokenness and sorrow, wherever people are tempted, or betrayed, or bewildered, or grief-stricken, the church is there too. For those who are already there, like the friends and family at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, they may not need as much of a reminder, but for those of us who can choose to go towards the pain or away from it, we choose to go towards it. And we can, at the very least, be the people who, when we're seen by those at their lowest, they can look and say, "You're here too. Thanks."

I'm not saying that this is the end of our Christian responsibility, but perhaps it's the beginning. I've said before that our Christian responsibility is also to use our most creative selves to solve the most perplexing problems that hurt our world. But we need to begin with compassion, literally meaning "suffering with" - that is, going and being with the people who are hurting.

So this Lent, some of us, myself included, might need to spend some time learning to let our hearts break with those whose hearts are breaking. This is our Lenten discipline as we learn who we really are. Jesus expresses his humanity by going into the wilderness. We express our humanity by following Jesus there. And when we get there, we will find people who are broken. We'll find those whose sons and daughters have been killed, we'll meet those whose lives have been derailed by addiction, we'll find those whose bodies bear the burdens of time and disease.

But we will also find hope. At the end of Lent lies the empty cross, and there a community of people who rise out of the ashes to live with love as their law. There we find the Lord himself at a table with disciples from every corner of the earth, themselves wounded healers who know the power of compassion. Just, not quite yet. Right now, the world is hurting, and our hope is in our Lord who is right there with those who are hurting. And in a world crying out for compassion, we're there too.